

The Book That Changed My Life

Two years ago this summer I read a book that changed the entire way I see the world. I had been researching various topics — law, politics, the media — and become more and more convinced that something was seriously wrong. Politicians, I was shocked to discover, weren't actually doing what the people wanted. And the media, my research found, didn't really care much about that, preferring to focus on such things as posters and polls.

As I thought about this more, its implications struck me as larger and larger. But I still had no bigger picture to fit them in. The media was simply doing a bad job, leading people to be confused. We just had to pressure them to do better and democracy would be restored.

Then, one night, I watched the film *Manufacturing Consent: Noam Chomsky and the Media* (I think it had come up in my Netflix queue). First off, it's simply an amazingly-good film. I've watched it several times now and each time I'm utterly entranced. It's undoubtedly the best documentary I've seen, weaving together all sorts of clever tricks to enlighten and entertain.

Second, it makes shocking points. I didn't understand all of what it was saying at the time, but I understood enough to realize that something was severely amiss. The core of the film is a case study of Indonesia's brutal invasion of the country of East Timor. The US personally gave the green light to the invasion and provided the weapons, which allowed Indonesia to massacre the population in an occupation that, per capita, ranks with the Holocaust. And the US media ignores it and when they do cover it, inevitably distorts it.

Shocked and puzzled by the film, I was eager to learn more. Noam Chomsky has dozens of books but I was fortunate to choose to read *Understanding Power*, a thick paperback I picked up at the library. Edited by Peter Mitchell and John Schoeffel, two public defenders in New York, the book is a collection of transcripts of group discussions with Chomsky.

Chomsky lays out the facts in a conversational style, telling stories and explaining things in response to questions from the groups, covering an incredibly wide range of topics. And on every single one, what he tells you is completely shocking, at odds with everything you know, turning the way you see things upside-down. Mitchell and Schoeffel know you're unlikely to believe these things, so they've carefully footnoted and documented every claim, providing blockquote excerpts from the original sources to establish them.

Each story, individually, can be dismissed as some weird oddity, like what I'd learned about the media focusing more on posters than on policy. But seeing them all together, you can't help but begin to tease out the larger picture, to ask yourself what's behind all these disparate things, and what that means for the way we see the world.

Reading the book, I felt as if my mind was rocked by explosions. At times the ideas were too much that I literally had to lie down. (I'm not the only one to feel this way — Norman Finkelstein noted that when he went through a similar experience, "It was a totally crushing experience for me. ... My world literally caved in. And there were quite a number of weeks where ... I just was in bed, totally devastated.") I remember vividly clutching at the door to my room, trying to hold on to something while the world spun around.

For weeks afterwards, everything I saw was in a different light. Every time I saw a newspaper or magazine or person on TV, I questioned what I thought knew about them, wondered how they fit into this new picture. Questions that had puzzled me for years suddenly began making sense in this new world. I reconsidered everyone I knew, everything I thought I'd learned. And I found I didn't have much company.

It's taken me two years to write about this experience, not without reason. One terrifying side effect of learning the world isn't the way you think is that it leaves you all alone. And when you try to describe your new worldview to people, it either comes out sounding unsurprising ("yeah, sure, everyone knows the media's got problems") or like pure lunacy and people slowly back away.

Ever since then, I've realized that I need to spend my life working to fix the shocking brokenness I'd discovered. And the best way to do that, I concluded, was to try to share what I'd discovered with others. I couldn't just tell them it straight out, I knew, so I had to provide the hard evidence. So I started working on a book to do just that. (I'm looking for people to help, if you're interested.)

It's been two years now and my mind has settled down some. I've learned a bunch more but, despite my best efforts, haven't found any problems with this frightening new world view. After all this time, I'm finally ready to talk about what happened with some distance and I hope I'm now able to begin work on my book in earnest.

It was a major change, but I wouldn't give it up for anything.

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